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Cuban Americans Fight for Contras

Bay of Pigs Survivors, 25 Years Later, Still Battling Leftists

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MIAMI—In the sweltering tropical forests of southern Nicaragua, about two dozen Cuban Americans are acting as military advisers to guerrillas battling to oust the leftist Sandinista government, according to Nicaraguan rebel commanders and Cuban community leaders here.

In the two years since Cuban Americans first shouldered assault rifles to participate directly in firefights in Nicaragua, one has been killed in combat, two have been captured by Sandinista forces and two remain in jail in Costa Rica after immigration authorities there arrested them en route to the Nicaraguan border, their Cuban sponsors in Miami said.

The Cuban Americans who signed on to fight with the Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras or counterrevolutionaries, are dedicated activists with roots in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, committed to backing anticommunist causes in the hemisphere. Cuban-American support for the contras has also included raising at least $1 million in aid through radio marathons and private contributions, and donations of nonlethal goods such as shoes, uniforms, compasses and canteens, according to interviews with members of this community.

The Oct. 5 downing of a C-123K cargo plane carrying arms for the contras in southern Nicaragua unexpectedly cast a spotlight on the Cuban-American involvement in Central America's conflict.

"We would prefer to dedicate all our efforts to liberating Cuba. But the reality is there are no guerrillas there now," said Juan Perez-Franco, president of the 2506 Brigade, an association of veterans of the ill-fated, U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion and the group sponsoring the Cuban Americans in Nicaragua. The number 2506 was the identification number of the first man killed in the 1961 operation.

"We have to support others who are opposing communism, and the nearest fight now is in Nicaragua," Perez-Franco said.

Cuban Americans who assist the contras run the gamut from a self-made wealthy banana importer lauded for his business record in President Reagan's 1984 State of the Union message to a free-lance guerrilla fighter who organized a shipment of goods that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is examining for possible weapons-related violations.

Eugene Hasenfus, 45, the American crewman who survived the Oct. 5 crash and was captured by Sandinista troops, said the secret air resupply operation for the contras was run from the Ilopango military airfield in San Salvador by two Cuban Americans who he thought "worked for the CIA."

Controversy has swirled around the elusive Felix Ismael Rodriguez Mendigutia, 45, known in El Salvador as "Max Gomez," described by his friends in Miami and by Hasenfus as the main coordinator of the clandestine contra arms missions.

Rodriguez has met with Vice President Bush at least twice in Washington—although Bush says they did not discuss the contras—and is a longtime friend of Bush's national security affairs adviser, Donald P. Gregg.

In Managua, Sandinista intelligence officers have said the second Cuban named by Hasenfus—a man known in El Salvador as "Ramon Medina"—was in fact Luis Posada Carriles, a fugitive terrorist sought for his alleged role in the 1976 bombing of a Cubana airlines passenger plane.

The Nicaraguan officers also mentioned Gustavo Villoldo, a Cuban American said to have advised contras based in Honduras in 1984.

From interviews with friends and acquaintances of the three Cuban Americans as well as community leaders in Miami who support the anti-Sandinista rebels, no evidence emerged to link the secret air resupply operation directly to the U.S. government. The Cuban Americans were acting, each in a different way, on their own initiatives, friends and associates said.

Contra leaders have refused to say who controlled and paid for the flights. The Reagan administration, forbidden by Congress in October 1984 from giving military aid to the contras, has denied any direct involvement.

But the three Cuban Americans, along with others active with the contras, share political roots in the Bay of Pigs assault against Cuban communist leader Fidel Castro organized by the Central Intelligence Agency. The downed plane revealed a new aspect of the careers of a number of Cuban exiles who view themselves as combating a communist threat, sometimes with the backing of the U.S. government but often without it.

The Cuban exiles were well suited to help the contras when the Reagan administration was barred from helping to overthrow the Sandinista government militarily but not from encouraging private volunteers. Felix Rodriguez, for example, worked for more than a decade with the CIA before retiring in the mid-1970s and had so many contacts in the U.S. government that many people he met in Central America, including prisoner Hasenfus, simply assumed he was still operating covertly for Washington.

Rodriguez's friends said he didn't say who he worked for and they, knowing his history, didn't ask.

Contra leaders welcome the Cubans' help. "They have been extremely important to us in terms of material assistance and moral support because of the degree of their commitment," said Leonardo Somarriba, a coordinator in Miami for the main contra alliance, the United Nicaraguan Opposition. "They help

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us not to make the same mistakes they made, to deal in realities."

Cuban Americans who participate directly in the anti-Sandinista cause are heroes to many in the Miami community. To their critics, they are anti-Castro fanatics and mercenaries.

The Hasenfus incident drew attention to the Cuban Americans' role just as it is becoming more symbolic than significant because of Reagan administration preparations to deliver the first installments of $100 million in new military and non-lethal aid to the contras.

The small Cuban unit on the contras' southern front bordering Costa Rica is providing "professional instruction" to several hundred Nicaraguan guerrillas, according to their commander, Fernando (El Negro) Chamorro. From Miami, 2506 Brigade leaders maintain contact with the Cuban unit by means of a ham radio the group donated, Chamorro said.

One Cuban, whose name the 2506 Brigade did not release, killed himself in May after he stumbled into a Sandinista minefield and was badly wounded, according to Perez-Franco. Two Cubans captured in June by Sandinista infantrymen, when presented to the press by Nicaraguan officials, said they went to the United States in the chaotic 1980 Mariel boatlift and agreed to join Chamorro's fighters because they were broke, homeless and jobless in Miami.

By contrast, Felix Rodriguez is a legend for his lifelong, single-minded dedication to anticommunist campaigns. "He is a great patriot, a professional soldier," said Jorge Mas Canosa, chairman of the Cuban-American National Foundation, the most influential lobbying group of its kind in the country. Mas Canosa has been a friend of Rodriguez since they fought together at the Bay of Pigs. Friends said Rodriguez was in Miami when Hasenfus blew his El Salvador cover and that he has remained in touch with them from an undisclosed location.

"We see Felix as an asset—doing what many of us would like to do but we might not have the time or the courage," said fellow Bay of Pigs veteran Rolando Eugenio Martinez, who was convicted and later pardoned in the 1972 burglary that exposed the Watergate scandal.

Rodriguez's involvement with the CIA began when he was infiltrated into Cuba prior to the April 1961 invasion, in one of the most perilous phases of the Bay of Pigs assault.

After the invaders were routed, Rodriguez assisted until 1969 with covert missions to smuggle out stranded fighters, according to Martinez, who coordinated the operation. Even then, Martinez said, he was never certain which U.S. agency detailed Rodriguez to his operation, though they were close friends.

In the early '60s Rodriguez was an officer in a special army unit of Bay of Pigs exiles at Fort Benning, Ga. He was one of a handful of Cubans working for the U.S. government in the 1967 Bolivian jungle manhunt that killed Cuban communist revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara, according to Miguel Alvarez, a Rodriguez friend and former 2506 Brigade president. In the early '70s he went to Vietnam as a CIA airmobile counterinsurgency expert, said Theodore Shackley, a former top CIA official and a friend of Rodriguez.

Rodriguez injured his back in a combat helicopter crash and could hardly walk. He retired in the mid-'70s from the CIA on disability. Friends say they think he relies on his pension to support his wife and two teen-aged children.

Rodriguez sought, with moderate success, to parlay his government contacts into business deals in Latin America. He became a partner of Gerard Latchinian, 48, a Miami-based arms broker convicted last February of conspiring in 1984 to assassinate the former president of Honduras, Roberto Suazo. Latchinian is serving a 30-year sentence.

Latchinian's lawyer, Laurel Marc-Charles, said in 1979 her client took the unusual step of allowing Rodriguez to hold stock in his company because the Cuban American had "golden" connections in the CIA and other U.S. agencies.

Jose Basulto, a construction contractor, recalled a chance encounter in early 1985 in a Miami hospital between Rodriguez and Adolfo Calero, a leader of the United Nicaraguan Opposition. Rodriguez told Calero that he was going to El Salvador to advise its military because his combat skills made him more useful there than with the contras.

Rodriguez switched to coordinating contra arms flights early this year, Basulto said. Rodriguez's friends say he is not paid by the CIA or the Salvadoran military. Rodriguez told Basulto the air resupply flights were privately financed.

Friends said they occasionally gave Rodriguez airplane tickets and cash to return to Central America from Miami.

The second Cuban to make his way to El Salvador early this year was former CIA operative Luis Posada, who escaped in August 1985 from a Venezuelan prison after eight years awaiting trial on charges linked to the Cubana airliner bombing, which killed 73.

In a letter Posada wrote in May from Central America to a friend in Venezuela, he said he went there to pursue his "war to the death and without quarter against Fidel Castro." He underwent plastic surgery, grew a beard, and was wearing military fatigues when he was interviewed in May by a Venezuelan journalist, Rafael del Naranco. Cuban associates of Posada told del Naranco he chose El Salvador because his contacts in the military made it "a calm place" for him.

Posada and Rodriguez served together at Ft. Benning. Unidentified sources told the Miami Herald that in El Salvador Posada used the name "Ramon Medina," the same name cited by American prisoner Hasenfus. Basulto said a "participant" in the contra air resupply operation told him "Medina" was not Posada but another Cuban American at the Ilopango base.

The third Cuban mentioned in connection with the downed plane, Gustavo Villoldo, crossed paths with Rodriguez in Bolivia in 1967, friends of both Cubans said. A construction engineer in Miami, Villoldo approached contra field commanders in Honduras in 1984 boasting of links to Washington officials and asking to join the fight, a contra official said. Former spokesman Edgar Chamorro, who has since broken with the contras, said the CIA warned contra leaders at the time that Villoldo was untrustworthy and could sow dissension.

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The first Cuban-American guerrilla advisers went to Costa Rica two years ago. When Perez-Franco became president of the 2506 Brigade last spring he made the military effort in Central America official, and put Rene Corvo in charge of relations with the contras.

Until this year only Cubans who fought at the Bay of Pigs could be brigade members, Perez-Franco said. In an unprecedented move, he extended the membership to include "all freedom fighters," including Nicaraguans fighting the Sandinista government.

He said the Cuban Americans decided to concentrate their efforts in southern Nicaragua because it was less developed than the northern front, where more than 10,000 rebels operate out of bases in Honduras.

A March 1985 plane shipment to the contras by a group of Cuban Americans that included Corvo prompted the FBI to investigate allegations that the cargo included automatic rifles and other weapons. The organizers of the flight deny the allegations and no charges have been filed.

That shipment and one in June 1985 were flown from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to the Ilopango air base in San Salvador in a Convair cargo plane owned by Florida Aircraft Leasing Corp., according to its president, Thomas Boy. Boy said on both occasions the plane was leased for about $16,000 to Daniel Vazquez Jr., who operates a separate air charter business. Vazquez said that the money for both flights came from Corvo and that no weapons were aboard.

Corvo refused comment last week.

Among the Cuban-American organizations providing strictly humanitarian assistance to the contras is a nonprofit group called "Concerned Citizens for Democracy," headed by Carlos M. Perez, a Republican who runs a Miami-based banana import business. Perez said his group raised about $125,000 in funds, clothing and shoes for the contras.

A list of the group's directors provided by Perez includes a number of Cuban-American businessmen, a former Reagan speechwriter, and retired Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, the contras' well-known private fund-raiser, who is listed as an advisory board member.

The close relationship between many pro-contra Cuban-American leaders, most of whom are Republican, and Miami-area Republican chairman John E. (Jeb) Bush, the son of the vice president, has fueled speculation that the vice president quietly assisted Rodriguez's work with the contras.

Jeb Bush denied any role in the resupply operation. "I support the contras, but I have not been involved in aiding them directly," he said. One Cuban-American leader he has worked with closely is lobbyist Mas Canosa. "He is one of us," Mas Canosa said of Jeb Bush. It was at a Cuban-American celebration last May 20 organized by Mas Canosa that the vice president, a former CIA director, last shook hands with Rodriguez.

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